



## **SPECIAL SECTION: VOICES OUT OF THE DARK? CONTEMPORARY MUSEUM-LIKE PRACTICES AND CULTURALIZED POLITICS**



### **Introduction**

*Paula Mota Santos and Hugo DeBlock*

The articles for this special section of *Museum Worlds* first started to gain their present form as presentations in the panel “Voices Out of The Dark: Contemporary Museum-Like Practices and Culturalized Politics” during the 2018 Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) in San José, California. Those were very different times from the ones in which this introduction is being rewritten. Now, in late July of 2020, the world has been living for several months with the full consequences of a major globalized public health crisis: the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has disrupted and changed people’s lives in almost every aspect of their daily routines and actions. Also now, in late July of 2020, we have been living through times of increased calls for change: the Black Lives Matter movement has gained momentum and a global reach after the unlawful killing by a police officer of George Floyd this past May in the city of Minneapolis.

Both events impact museums. On the one hand, the pandemic has closed down public spaces and cultural venues in general and it poses new challenges to museums in terms of how to be a cultural venue where people gather to participate in exhibitions, workshops, talks, and educational programs as means of supporting the community and as means to maintain financial viability. On the other hand, the Black Lives Matter movement gave a new urgency to decolonizing dynamics that implicate several sociocultural institutions from universities to city public spaces and, particularly, to museums. Museums, as with many other institutions, which we all had taken for granted, are facing challenges that, at best, will change them or, at worst, will close them. None of us back in November 2018, in a bushfire smoke-covered California, could have anticipated the times in which we would be finishing writing and publishing our papers. But although the world is different, strangely enough museums and writing about them in the context of culturalized politics has not lost its relevance, as we hope readers will see through the contributions to this issue.



## The Museum

With its roots in the private and heterogeneous collections of the rulers and wealthy families of the past, the museum as an idea and a place has traveled through time as an undercover shapeshifter. A deceptively uniform word, “museum,” in fact covers an ever-increasing array of places, ideas, and curatorial and managerial practices inside as well as outside of its walls and into the cityscapes of which it usually forms a part. This multiplicity does not overshadow one of the most central characteristics of the museum: the fact that, through the work of collecting, classifying, ordering, and displaying, the museum can effect—and also affect—the social world as a form of governmentality (Bennett 1995). In fact, museums and museum-like places work as “technologies of the self,” inasmuch as they are spaces that work toward materializing and solidifying group identity. The proliferation of museums in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was undoubtedly linked to the workings of the imagination because it was closely bound up with the formation of the nation-state (Macdonald 1996), be it European, colonial, or postcolonial (see, among others, also Anderson 1983). The early twenty-first century, however, brought a period in which these nation-based identities of the past became increasingly challenged by the emergence of new identity-formations (e.g., ethnonationalisms, diasporas, regionalisms, and lifestyle movements).

If the genealogy of the museum *cum* idea and space is retraceable to the privileged and their desire to possess remarkable objects not only as an instantiation of power and social status, but also as a medium of illustration, the present shows us the need to rethink these spaces of white epistemologies toward more broadly thought out ontologies of what museums are or can be in an exercise of “comparative museology” (Kreps 2003, 2006). As Ivan Karp and Corinne Kratz wrote,

Museums can be temples of civilization, sites for the creation of citizens, forums for debate, settings for cultural interchange and negotiation of values, engines of economic renewal and revenue generation, imposed colonialist enterprises, havens of elitist distinction and discrimination, and places of empowerment and recognition. (Karp and Kratz 2006: 1)

White museums need to open up to new ways of thinking about what they can be, beyond the all too often and too easily used discourses of shared heritage or working together, or the over-used contact zones-frame that James Clifford developed specifically in relation to museums, all concepts that have been valuable but that have also shown their shortcomings over the last decades, ever since museology returned to the core of anthropological thought and practice in the early 1980s, and particularly since George Stocking’s widely influential *Objects and Others* (1985). For example, in Indigenous views, museums can be thought of as being in nature (e.g., sacred rocks in landscapes) rather than in buildings in cities. A testimony to the need for change, and to the difficulties that such change entails, was the September 2019 General Conference and General Assembly of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) that took place in Kyoto, Japan. Over four thousand museum directors, curators, archeologists, historians, anthropologists, art historians, and others from around the globe gathered in Kyoto for a week-long meeting, one in which the main agenda item was reaching an agreement on what, exactly, a museum is. Although the ICOM’s Executive Board had taken to the General Assembly a new alternative definition for a vote to be included in the ICOM Statutes, it was not possible to reach an agreement on the form and content of the new text that will substitute the working version approved in 2007. It was agreed instead that the vote should be postponed.

What the difficulty experienced at the 2019 ICOM General Assembly is stating is the following: museums matter. The development of anthropology’s fieldwork practices in the early twentieth century had a significant impact on what was gathered from different sites, on how it

was collected, and on how such collections were relayed to power centers. These practices also constituted the fieldworker as a new kind of authority that called the armchair anthropologist's authority into question. And while at that time museum–anthropologist relationships seemed to have been made distant as anthropologists increasingly occupied positions in the developing university system (see, for example, Boas's move away from the American Museum of Natural History and his student training at Columbia), the truth is that the relation between the science (anthropology) and the site of authority (the museum), even if changed, does continue to exist. If to have a museum or a museum-like site can be seen as a performative utterance of having an identity, then the appearance of museum-like places also goes hand-in-hand with the emergence of their publics as consumers of the representations on display. In fact, museums and museum-like places, by virtue of the materiality on display, are experienced by their audiences as factual when instead they are a work of the imagination, where often the role of the anthropologist–fieldworker as mediator between collective identities and the techniques of self-representation is still at play.

Museums matter, still. In present-day conditions of increased neoliberalism, we see a shift from state-based regimes of protection of patrimony to multiscale and multisectorial assemblages that rely increasingly upon “the self-empowerment of capacitated citizens and self-organized communities in marketed relationships which position cultural heritage as a resource” (Coombe and Weiss 2015: 43). Thus, to the challenges brought to the museum, one has to add the emergence of new forces such as global corporations and supranational organizations that have become increasingly influential on the global scene in which a multiplicity of identities are increasingly being played out. This is made particularly clear in the current debates and movements, globally, to decolonize museums: rights-based practices and discourses act as ways of expressing the limits of governmentality through groups that bring their own cultural resources to bear upon governmental demands (Coombe and Weiss 2015), enlarging a rights-based discourse and practice in the field of heritage politics at large and particularly in museum politics.

## **The Articles**

This special section, then, is the result of a set of papers that were part of a panel of the 2018 AAA Annual Meeting. Because museums are still, and increasingly so, spaces where “a battle over representation, recognition and respect” (Modest 2018: 14) is being fought on a daily basis, and because anthropology and anthropologists are still, and perhaps always will be, enmeshed in museum worlds, the 2018 panel aimed to address the relation between anthropologists engaged with specific communities and the poetics and politics of identity representation (Karp and Lavine 1991), which is the context of a present where neoliberal conditions impinge strongly on the heritage regime and on the variety of power differentials at play in (de-)colonial museums. Or to put it in the words of Christina Kreps, as she stated in her recent book: can we say that we are entering a new age, an “age of engagement,” “in which both museums and the discipline of anthropology have been responding to pressures to be more socially relevant, publicly engaged, and accountable to diverse communities”? (2020: 1).

The articles gathered here present ethnographically grounded instances that illuminate the increase in rights-based discourses and practices—the new forms of culturalized politics (Coombe and Weiss 2015)—as objectified in museums or museum-like places and their practices (i.e., the representational systems used and/or the places' actual or intended audiences). The aim is to reflect on the processes whereby new and yet again marginalized social identities

and imaginaries—the voices that are being kept in the dark—are emerging and performatively engaging in resisting and/or adapting through museum-like practices of representation. It is through the (Indigenous) voices that have been kept in the dark for so long, and the voices of current grassroots and diaspora communities and globalized movements—that sound louder and clearer as we are writing—that new ontologies and new ways of thinking and working with the intellectual and cultural property of different peoples will be once more developed. It is through those formerly marginalized, enslaved, racialized, and colonized people that museum professionals and anthropologists are learning by listening. And it is by listening to those who know and feel that the discipline of (museum) anthropology is once more critically assessing itself and pushing itself toward new horizons, from the deviance of keeping voices in the dark to bringing them out, center stage, in new settings.

The first article is by Rachel Giraudo, who addresses the processes through which a stigmatized and kept-on-the-margins identity—cannabis grower and consumer—is actively turning the tables and moving toward mainstream social universes. Although referring to the action of long-term activists, Giraudo is focused on the role that museums and museum-like practices are playing in this major shift in discourse (in the Foucauldian sense) on cannabis and its producers and consumers. Together with a detailed historical narrative of our relation to the plant as translated by different legislative texts—mostly in the United States (but also some other American countries such as Canada and Mexico)—Giraudo carries out a detailed presentation of specific instances of museum and museum-like practices that are working toward the turning of a “deviant heritage” into just “heritage.” The level of detail that Giraudo has on the terrain she has been studying was additionally enabled by her role as an advisor to some of the Californian cannabis-grower communities, namely those who for a long time had to keep “in the shadows” their relation to the plant. To these more traditional and small-scale growers, the new world of legal production, distribution, and consumption is posing unexpected challenges, as they have to face business models that fall outside their way of relating to the plant. In an effort to avoid the erasure of their specific growers’ world, we find the communities taking actions toward the development of the idea of terroir and the creation of appellation areas and toward fundamental heritage/as identity-infused concepts.

The second article is focused also on structures of plant production, but of a very different nature from the ones studied by Giraudo in California. Cristiana Bastos offers us a study of a present-day relation with a past socioeconomic structure: the Hawai‘i plantations. Bastos, although with a preferential focus on the local Portuguese ascendancy community, presents us with the ways in which the national/ethnic communities that worked in Hawai‘i plantations construct heritage through the musealization of the plantation and how by doing so they are not only consolidating their contribution to Hawai‘i’s society, but also asserting their belonging to it. Bastos also address the plantation-racialization nexus. She analyzes the role of plantation museums in confronting, legitimizing, and/or filtering the racialized violence on which the plantation economy stood, arguing that the plantation museum project is consistent with an idealized view of Hawai‘i’s society as a multiethnic racial paradise. According to Bastos, museum-like practices (i.e., the self-presentation of a collective heritage composed of multiple distinct identities originating in the plantation era) still provide a tool that counterweights the unresolved and unsettled tensions in contemporary postplantation Hawai‘i.

The third article is strongly rooted in issues of race and museum-like practices. With Paula Mota Santos’s article, we move from the Americas to Europe, and in the latter, to Portugal in particular. Mota Santos analyzes the first permanent slavery-related exhibition in Portugal, which opened in 2016 in the Portuguese city of Lagos, and coordinated with UNESCO’s Slave Route Project. This exhibition was triggered by the discovery in 2009 in Lagos of human remains

that proved to be of enslaved Africans and that dated to the fifteenth century, the very onset of Portugal's colonial rule and slave-trading. The site of the discovery of what is probably the first burial ground of enslaved Africans in Europe is not memorialized; but the memory of this burial ground is on display in the Lagos exhibition. Mota Santos takes us to this exhibition, analyzing it in detail through the frame of its rhetoric and poetics, contemplating how they affect the meaning of the reality on display (i.e., slavery and the slave trade). She argues that this exhibition is yet another instance of "Lusotropicalism," a self-conceptualization by the Portuguese of their colonial rule as benign. This is a concept based on the work of Brazilian anthropologist Gilberto Freyre from the 1930s and 1950s. In an era marked by the urgency of decolonization, Mota Santos speaks as to the "why" of the invisibility or aphasia of the real magnitude of the slave trade and of Portugal's role in it in this exhibition, and she questions the fate of the remains of the dead enslaved Africans in a university storage facility.

The realm of funerary practices and its present-day relevance is the core ethnographic material in Kathleen Adams's article, the fourth in the series. By examining the politics and cultural poetics underlying the birth of a new North Toraja Regency museum (Indonesia), Adams also showcases how certain current-day neoliberal conditions (tourism expansion, the commodification of sacred heritage arts, and Indonesian nation-building) and national political shifts have spurred Torajan leaders to embrace new museum-based tactics and strategies for asserting new, more authoritative visions of identity. Adams's article contributes also to comparative museology by examining the curation practices and politics at play in locally run museums and museum-like heritage spaces in the Toraja Highlands (namely, family-run museums), while it also examines the complex cultural, religious, and political challenges entailed in efforts to repatriate stolen effigies (*tau-tau*) and grave materials.

The fifth article is by Hugo DeBlock, focusing on one specific object: the *Lengnangulong* sacred stone of North Ambrym in Vanuatu. If some objects that are kept in overseas museums serve as archives of the past, in Vanuatu itself—as in many other places—such objects can now increasingly be reconnected to original places, lineages, and owners. At the core of DeBlock's article are the "conversations" circulating in Vanuatu on *Lengnangulong*, while it is being kept and exhibited in the Pavillon des Sessions of the Louvre Museum in Paris. DeBlock provides an update on discussions and disagreements regarding ownership and *kopiraet* (Indigenous copyright) that have been accelerating in Vanuatu in recent years and on claims for repatriation of this important valuable. DeBlock also showcases how certain current-day neoliberal conditions (tourism expansion, the commodification of sacred heritage arts, and regional identity-building) and national political shifts have spurred processes in which *kastom* ("custom") is remade, artifacts recrafted, and ownership and property rights (*kopiraet*) of old and newly made things reestablished or, rather, problematized in newly emerging conditions.

The special section closes with an Afterword written by Christina Kreps. In her text she picks up from her discussant comments to the 2018 AAA panel that is at the basis of this special section to build an overview of the shifting meanings the museum as an institution and as a set of ideas has been experiencing: from the edifice itself to (the possibilities/restrictions of) the collection, and from curatorial practices that adapt and adjust according to new conditions to disciplinary canons that remain or vanish. To the museum overview Christina Kreps intertwines the ways the five articles here published (and the five anthropologists' situated research) reflect and speak to (and from) the myriad of ways of being in the world for museums and museum-like places as they echo what's happening in the world today, from decolonization to current anti-racist activism, spurring museum work to keep in tune, lead the way—or sit still and listen and learn, open up, and reflect. Christina Kreps *Afterword* ties up the contributions in this volume by going into these and other issues that make up current museum- and heritage work

and process and practice, in a context of increased culturalized politics, speaking to the need for community engagement and an increasing commitment to including the voices that are coming out of the dark and are increasingly taking center stage.

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